

1 THE LEGISLATIVE PRESENTATION OF
2 THE AMERICAN LEGION

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4 TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 10, 2013

5 United States Senate,
6 Committee on Veterans Affairs,
7 Joint with the
8 House of Representatives,
9 Committee on Veterans Affairs,
10 Washington, D.C.

11 The committees met, pursuant to notice, at 10:17 a.m.,
12 in Room G-50, Dirksen Senate Office Building, Hon. Bernard
13 Sanders, chairman of the Senate Committee on Veterans
14 Affairs, presiding.

15 Present: Senators Sanders, Begich, Blumenthal,
16 Isakson, Boozman, and Heller. Representatives Flores, Roe,
17 Coffman, Brownley, Kirkpatrick, Kuster, and Walz.

18 OPENING STATEMENT OF CHAIRMAN SANDERS

19 Chairman Sanders. Good morning and let me welcome all
20 of you to this joint hearing of the Senate and House
21 Veterans Affairs Committees. We welcome today the American
22 Legion and Commander Dellinger and his leadership team, who
23 will present the legislative priorities of the American
24 Legion, the nation's largest Veterans Service Organization.

25 And let me just say a few words about the purpose of

1 this hearing, which is important. For us on the House and
2 Senate Veterans Affairs Committees to do our jobs well, we
3 need to hear from you and the other veterans organizations.
4 You are on the ground. You are dealing every day with
5 veterans who know what is working in the VA and who know
6 what is not working, and you are dealing with veterans who
7 have ideas about how we can improve the system. So we
8 cannot do our job well unless we are working with you, and
9 we intend to do just that. So thank you all very much for
10 being with us this morning.

11 Let me also acknowledge Commander Dellinger and thank
12 you very much for your service to our country. We look
13 forward to working with you during the coming year.

14 And to mention to you, also--some of you may know Steve
15 Robertson. Steve worked with the American Legion here in
16 D.C. for the last 22 years and I stole him away from you.

17 [Laughter.]

18 Chairman Sanders. I apologize, but he is doing a great
19 job for us and for veterans throughout the country.

20 And I also want to acknowledge Milt Willis. Milt is an
21 old friend from the State of Vermont. Milt, where are you?
22 Somewhere. All right. And I want to thank Milt for the
23 work that he has done for veterans in Vermont and thank him
24 for being here today.

25 Earlier this year, the committees, the Senate and the

1 House committees, had an opportunity to hear from a number
2 of veterans organizations at hearings just like this. These
3 VSOs identified their priorities, just as you will do today,
4 and they offered recommendations to address the challenges
5 confronting America's veterans and their families. And I am
6 proud to say that I and my staff, and I am sure it is
7 equally true in the House, listened closely to what you had
8 to say and we are in the process of implementing to the best
9 degree that we can. As all of you know, we cannot do
10 everything that we would like to do. We are under fiscal
11 constraints. But we have listened closely, and I think you
12 will find that we are responding to many of the requests and
13 the concerns raised by the American Legion and the other
14 service organizations.

15 Among other actions, we have moved forward. We had
16 what we call a markup legislative session in July and we
17 moved forward on a number of pieces of legislation,
18 including addressing the very serious crisis regarding the
19 backlog of the claims system. Everybody in this room knows
20 that it is not acceptable in this country for veterans to be
21 waiting years to get their claims processed. We are going
22 to move on that issue. We are moving on that issue. And we
23 are going to solve that problem.

24 We are going to move forward, as we have already, to
25 eliminate the national disgrace of tens of thousands of

1 veterans sleeping out on the streets of America. We are
2 making progress on that. We are going to continue to make
3 progress on that.

4 Everybody in this room understands that in the United
5 States today, we have a very tough economy, real
6 unemployment close to 14 percent, employment for younger
7 people even higher than that. We are going to continue to
8 work with the veterans organizations to make sure that when
9 men and women come back from war, they are going to get the
10 jobs that they need to take care of their family.

11 We have, in my view, a good health care system within
12 the VA. It needs to be improved, and with your help, we are
13 going to improve it. And we are also going to, if I have
14 anything to say about it, expand the successful caregivers
15 program that we passed several years ago, which provides
16 caregiver support for the post-9/11 veterans. We intend to
17 make that support available to all families from all wars in
18 this country.

19 Let me just touch upon, very briefly, some of those
20 issues. All of you know that the Secretary of the VA,
21 General Shinseki, laid out a very ambitious goal to
22 transform the claims system, and his goal is, at the end of
23 2015, every claim processed will be dealt with within 125
24 days with 98 percent accuracy. That is an ambitious goal
25 and we intend to work with him to make sure that that goal

1 is achieved.

2 In terms of the caregiver program, what that is about
3 is saying that if a disabled veteran is at home and has
4 needs, finally, we are recognizing the wife or the mother or
5 the sister or the brother who is caring, helping to take
6 care of the day-to-day needs of that veteran, and that means
7 a tax-free monthly stipend. It means reimbursement for
8 travel expenses. It means health insurance. It means
9 mental health services and counseling. It means training
10 and respite care. People who take care of folks with severe
11 disabilities need help. We have brought about that help for
12 the post-9/11 veterans. We intend to expand that approach
13 to the families of all disabled veterans.

14 In terms of the COLA, let me say this. We have worked
15 with you and the other service organizations on an issue
16 that concerns me very much. I do not know how many people
17 up here support me, but let me say this. This country has a
18 serious deficit problem, no question about it, and there are
19 a lot of debates that have taken place in the last couple of
20 years as to how we go forward. No secret, differences
21 between Democrats and Republicans, et cetera, et cetera.
22 But I hope--I hope that we have unanimous agreement that one
23 way that we will not go forward in terms of balancing the
24 budget is going forward with a so-called chain CPI, which
25 cuts benefits for disabled veterans. That is not the way,

1 in my view, you balance the budget.

2 [Applause.]

3 Chairman Sanders. Last point. I think the VA does a
4 whole lot of good things. There are some areas they are not
5 good and that is outreach. You can have the best programs
6 in the world, but they do not mean anything unless a veteran
7 or his or her family knows about that program. I think we
8 are making progress. If you go to the VA website today, you
9 will find that it is a much better website than it was a
10 year or two years ago. In legislation that we passed, we
11 are also going to allow various types of organizations,
12 including the VSOs, to get some help in terms of making sure
13 that every veteran in this country understands the benefits
14 to which he or she is entitled.

15 So, we are making some progress. We have got a lot
16 more to do. We look forward to working with the American
17 people and the American Legion to make that happen.

18 It is now my pleasure to introduce a Congressman who is
19 representing Jeff Miller, the Chairman of the House Veterans
20 Committee, and that is Congressman Flores. Congressman,
21 thanks very much for being with us.

22 OPENING STATEMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE FLORES

23 Mr. Flores. Thank you, Chairman Sanders.

24 As you heard earlier, my name is Bill Flores. I am
25 honored to serve as the Chairman of the Economic Opportunity

1 Subcommittee of the Veterans Affairs Committee in the House
2 and I am here today in place of Jeff Miller, who is unable
3 to attend due to a hearing in the Armed Services Committee
4 on Syria. He sends his regrets and he welcomes you here
5 today.

6 As both the son and the son-in-law of veterans, it is
7 my pleasure to be here today to welcome the American
8 Legion's new National Commander, Dan Dellinger. Commander
9 Dellinger is accompanied this morning by his lovely wife
10 Margaret. It is my pleasure to welcome you.

11 It is also my privilege to welcome the National
12 President of the American Legion Auxiliary, Ms. Nancy Brown
13 Park. The American Legion Auxiliary is responsible for many
14 activities and advocacy initiatives to support families of
15 service members and veterans. Your work ensures that their
16 continued sacrifices do not go unrecognized.

17 Several individuals here today, like me, are proud to
18 call the Lone Star State home, and if you are from Texas,
19 would you please stand or wave. Do not be shy. There you
20 go.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Flores. Thank you.

23 I would also like to extend a special welcome to my
24 constituent, Ms. Geri Hentz [phonetic], from Bryan, Texas.
25 Thank you for taking time to travel as part of the

1 delegation.

2 The American Legion's advocacy for veterans sets an
3 example for every American veteran and non-veteran alike to
4 follow. America is great because of people like you, good
5 neighbors who support our heroes with actions, not just
6 words.

7 To help with that mission of service, the House
8 committee is focusing on three elements this fall that
9 respond to veterans' needs. First, crafting meaningful
10 legislation that will improve the lives of veterans and
11 families. Second, keeping the pressure on the
12 administration to reduce the backlog of disability benefits.
13 And, finally, demanding accountability for VA's repeated
14 patient safety violations.

15 Like all of the American Legion members, this committee
16 would like to see passage of the GI Tuition Fairness Act of
17 2013. Our committee has passed a bill to make it possible
18 for more out-of-State veterans to pay in-State tuition at
19 public universities. It is because of the efforts of Legion
20 members and others on the local level that many States
21 already extend in-State tuition to all veterans. But, more
22 must be done and we hope this bill will become law soon.

23 We are also working on bills to improve the Transition
24 Assistance Program, or TAP, as it is more commonly known, to
25 extend the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program, or VRAP,

1 to provide for advance funding for all VA discretionary
2 accounts, improve the Transition Assistance Program, and
3 guarantee the privacy of veterans while staying at VA
4 facilities. We are also working on reauthorizing needed
5 homeless programs, increasing the VA's ability to pay for
6 medical foster homes, among many other legislative
7 proposals. The American Legion has offered support to these
8 efforts on several levels and I thank you.

9 A responsive and strategically managed VA is vital to
10 all of these goals. As you are aware, the current backlog
11 of disability benefits is certainly not a new challenge, and
12 I welcome the news that VA has made some progress in
13 eliminating the backlog. However, our committee is not
14 convinced that the current strategies are truly making a
15 permanent dent in the backlog. Even if quantity were the
16 only measurable benchmark, the VA is still falling short.
17 Simple math indicates that at current rates of production
18 and claims being filed, the VA needs at least an
19 instantaneous 40 percent increase in production to meet
20 Secretary Shinseki's goal of eliminating the backlog by
21 2015.

22 I also believe that a lack of accountability at many
23 facilities is the root of VA's performance problems. In the
24 last year, we have seen far too many instances where failure
25 to provide prompt or proper medical treatment has resulted

1 in numerous preventable deaths, including suicides. Instead
2 of holding people accountable, Department officials seem to
3 be content to issue bureaucratic slaps on the wrist, or in
4 some cases, inexplicably provided managers with bonuses. VA
5 should replace, not reward, such bureaucrats with leaders
6 who will enforce safety and health standards that all
7 veterans deserve. Substandard care for veterans will not be
8 tolerated and managers must and will be held accountable.

9 Ultimately, VA must adopt greater measures of
10 transparency to uphold its sacred trust with the veteran
11 community. The House VA Committee will continue to demand
12 long-term solutions from the VA, and we are committed to
13 establishing avenues through which that accountability can
14 become reality.

15 Finally, I would want to thank you for bringing to the
16 committee's attention the recent decision by the IRS to
17 target Veterans Service Organizations for additional
18 scrutiny when applying for tax-exempt status. I promise you
19 that unfair treatment of Veterans Service Organizations will
20 not be tolerated and we will continue to work hand-in-glove
21 with the Legion to continue to examine this issue in more
22 detail in the coming weeks.

23 [Applause.]

24 Mr. Flores. In closing, I appreciate all of your
25 efforts to travel to Washington, D.C. to be with us today,

1 and I pledge to keep the lines of communication open to
2 effectively serve our veterans together.

3 Thank you, Commander, for your work and your support.
4 I look forward to your testimony, and God bless America and
5 God bless our veterans.

6 [Applause.]

7 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much, Congressman
8 Flores.

9 Ranking Member Mike Michaud, who is from the great
10 State of Maine. Congressman Michaud.

11 OPENING STATEMENT OF REPRESENTATIVE MICHAUD

12 Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman.

13 Mr. Dellinger, I want to thank you for being here
14 today. Congratulations on leading such an outstanding and
15 important organization as the American Legion. I know you
16 just came from the State of Maine and hopefully you had a
17 chance to have some good lobster up there, while you were up
18 there in Maine.

19 I also want to thank the Auxiliary for being here, as
20 well, and for all that you do to help support programs for
21 our veterans and their families and keeping the American
22 Legion in line, as well.

23 And I would also like to recognize and ask them to
24 stand, the members of the American Legion from the great
25 State of Maine. I know there are some out in the audience.

1 Would you please stand.

2 [Applause.]

3 Mr. Michaud. Thank you for your service and for making
4 the trip to Washington.

5 National Commander, I want to thank you for your
6 thoughtful and forward-leaning legislative agenda your
7 organization has developed. I share many of your concerns
8 and appreciate your vision on how our country should show
9 its gratitude to veterans and their families. I believe
10 there is an alignment between your legislative vision and
11 the work already underway by our committees.

12 Our committees are charged with oversight of the
13 Department of Veterans Affairs and veterans programs and
14 benefits. Over the last several years, working together, we
15 have been fortunate to be able to provide continued increase
16 in VA's budget. As the fiscal environment has contracted,
17 we have been able to preserve funding for VA programs and
18 ensure our nation delivers on its sacred obligation to our
19 veterans and their families. I agree with your testimony
20 that, in the future, it will become harder to do this, which
21 only means that we must work together to overcome the future
22 financial uncertainty.

23 Members of the House Veterans Affairs Committee
24 recently amended and will report out H.R. 813, a bill that
25 will expand VA's current two-year advance appropriation to

1 include additional discretionary accounts, provide for long-
2 range budgetary planning, to include quadrennial veterans
3 review and a five-year veterans program, and requires a
4 periodic review of VA's budget projections.

5 Another thing everyone agrees upon is that the current
6 VA claims backlog is unacceptable, and I applaud the
7 American Legion's efforts in partnering with the White House
8 joint forces and the VA to implement and promote the fully-
9 developed claims initiative. With over 2,600 accredited
10 representatives nationwide, your organization is certainly
11 doing its part to help avoid continual growth in the claims
12 backlog.

13 To ensure that the VA continues to do its part, we
14 recently amended and will report out H.R. 2189, this backlog
15 bill, which contains over 15 provisions to ensure, among
16 other things, that the VA takes an objective look at the
17 backlog issues, reports to Congress on performance and
18 progress of major initiatives at each regional office, and
19 gets the information it needs from other agencies, like the
20 Department of Defense and Social Security Administration.

21 This legislation also includes a provision to determine
22 which Navy ships went inland during the Vietnam War and
23 potentially recognize additional veterans who may have been
24 exposed to Agent Orange and other toxins. We still have
25 some other issues, I know, in the New England areas as it

1 relates to Gagetown and Agent Orange we must also address.

2 Our veterans are returning from war with invisible
3 wounds and need treatment but are discouraged from seeking
4 this care for a variety of reasons. As a nation, we can do
5 better. We have to get this right. To the American Legion,
6 I ask for your help on all these issues. As you talk to
7 members of the Committees on Veterans Affairs, I also hope
8 you talk to members of the Armed Services Committees, as
9 well, so that they can do their part for the early
10 intervention.

11 In terms of VA health care, we will continue to provide
12 oversight and hold VA accountable for management failures.
13 We have had several hearings this year alone on the
14 integrated Electronic Health Records, mental health access,
15 military sexual trauma, Legionella, and other patient safety
16 issues. The House successfully passed H.R. 671, the Ruth
17 Moore Act of 2013, to make it easier for victims of military
18 sexual trauma to receive treatment and disability benefits
19 for covering mental health diagnoses. In addition, I am
20 particularly pleased to say that we will soon report out
21 H.R. 1443, a bill to ensure adequate research into the
22 causes and treatments of tinnitus.

23 Again, I want to thank you, Commander, for your
24 military service during Vietnam, your continued dedication
25 and service in the years since you took up the challenge of

1 advocating for our veterans. I look forward to working with
2 you and the American Legion as both the House and the Senate
3 move forward with their respective bills in our individual
4 bodies. Once again, thank you for your service.

5 And, Mr. Chairman, I yield back the balance of my time
6 and also ask that my full remarks be entered into the
7 record. Thank you.

8 [The prepared statement of Mr. Michaud follows:]

9 / COMMITTEE INSERT

1 Chairman Sanders. Without objection. Thank you very
2 much, Congressman Michaud.

3 Senator Johnny Isakson is a member of the Senate
4 Veterans Affairs Committee and he is here standing in for
5 the Ranking Member, Richard Burr. Senator Isakson.

6 OPENING STATEMENT OF SENATOR ISAKSON

7 Senator Isakson. Thank you, Chairman Sanders.

8 It is an honor to welcome the American Legion and the
9 Legion Auxiliary, and in particular the National Commander,
10 Mr. Dellinger. Thank you for being here. Thank you for
11 your testimony. Thank you for your service to the United
12 States of America and all our citizens.

13 I want to welcome all the Georgia Legionnaires who are
14 here, and I understand that Roger Tengler [phonetic] from
15 Covington, Georgia; William Lientthrop [phonetic] from
16 Acworth; Larry Deal [phonetic] from Dallas; Bob Proctor
17 [phonetic] from Douglasville; Randy Goodman [phonetic] from
18 Powder Springs, and Harold Barnett [phonetic] from
19 Douglasville are here. Would you please stand.

20 [Applause.]

21 Senator Isakson. Commander Dellinger, your testimony
22 is compelling and your effort and advocacy on the part of
23 veterans is most appreciated. We all share your concerns on
24 a number of issues.

25 Probably the most important of all is the backlog on

1 claims, and we appreciate the continuing commitment of the
2 Legion to work with the VA and all of us on the committee to
3 see to it that we meet the goal of Secretary Shinseki and
4 see that that is addressed and completed at least by the
5 goal of 2015.

6 Also, I know the VA is concerned about compliance
7 issues in the medical system of the Veterans Administration.
8 Earlier in August, I held a hearing in Atlanta on the issue
9 of the mismanagement of the Mental Health Services
10 Department at the Atlanta VA. We all know that mental
11 health problems and soft tissue problems are probably the
12 biggest residual fact that we will deal with in the years to
13 come. We have got to see to it that we have the resources,
14 the manpower, and we use all those providers we can use to
15 see to it timely mental health services get to our veterans.

16 We are losing 8,000 veterans a year, 22 a day, to
17 suicide. Not all of those are the fault, certainly, of the
18 services that they get, but we have got to make sure they
19 get the very best services they can and the earliest
20 possible intervention. We also have to be willing to
21 address military sexual trauma, which is a major contributor
22 to many of those suicides. I remain committed, as does all
23 our committee, to see to it that we do that.

24 Commander, in your testimony, you talked about the
25 state of distrust. We need to see to it no state of

1 distrust exists when it comes to military hospital services
2 or mental health services in our VA, and I commit that I
3 will do everything I can to see to it that there is no
4 distrust but only a pride in the services the VA delivers to
5 those who have served our country.

6 May God bless all our veterans, and we thank you for
7 being here today.

8 [Applause.]

9 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much, Senator
10 Isakson.

11 Before we get to Commander Dellinger's testimony, I
12 would like to welcome Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth.
13 Congresswoman Duckworth is a distinguished combat veteran
14 and someone who has demonstrated her commitment to
15 addressing the issues facing veterans over and over and over
16 again.

17 Thank you for your continued service to this country
18 and for taking the time to be with us today. Congresswoman
19 Duckworth, the floor is yours.

1 INTRODUCTION OF DANIEL M. DELLINGER, NATIONAL
2 COMMANDER, THE AMERICAN LEGION, BY HON. TAMMY
3 DUCKWORTH, A REPRESENTATIVE IN CONGRESS FROM THE
4 STATE OF ILLINOIS

5 Ms. Duckworth. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 [Standing ovation.]

7 Ms. Duckworth. Thank you. Mr. Chairman, Ranking
8 Members, members of the committees, thank you so much for
9 having me here today. I am so pleased to have the privilege
10 of introducing Commander Dan Dellinger, and I also would
11 like to recognize the American Legion for the decades of
12 work that you have done defending the rights of our
13 veterans, military families, and our men and women in
14 uniform. Were it not for you, I would not be sitting up
15 here today. Thank you.

16 I also would like to recognize the American Legion for
17 their recent resolution that they passed to support the
18 Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The
19 CRPD will allow American veterans with disabilities to have
20 greater opportunities to work, study abroad, and travel as
21 countries implement this treaty. Service members and
22 veterans with disabilities will be able to lead active lives
23 around the world.

24 For military families stationed overseas with special
25 needs, the CRPD will make sure that they can bring their

1 children with special needs off bases and live lives in an
2 accessible environment, whatever country they happen to be
3 stationed in.

4 The American Legion recognizes that veterans who have
5 sustained disabilities as a result of combat should not be
6 prevented from traveling. The last time I was in Vincenza,
7 Italy, to visit our troops and then also in Landstuhl,
8 Germany, we had difficulty even taking some of those troops
9 off-post for a four-hour pass because their environments
10 were not accessible and they could not travel around in
11 their wheelchair.

12 So I thank the American Legion for understanding that
13 our veterans and their families who are serving abroad will
14 benefit from the disability treaty. I am also proud that
15 the American Legion appreciates the role of the United
16 States in leading in this very important area.

17 Commander Dellinger was elected National Commander of
18 the American Legion quite recently, just on August 29 of
19 this year. He graduated with a degree in criminology from
20 Indiana University of Pennsylvania and honorably served as
21 an Army Infantry Officer from 1972 to 1984. He has been
22 active with the American Legion since 1982, and I am
23 personally very proud of the fact that he and I belong to
24 the same American Legion post in Northern Virginia. I ask
25 my great State of Illinois American Legion members to bear

1 with me--

2 [Laughter.]

3 Ms. Duckworth. --but I have maintained my membership
4 in Post 1995 of Centreville, Virginia, because my father
5 helped to found it, and--

6 [Applause.]

7 Ms. Duckworth. My father, who was a World War II and a
8 Vietnam veteran, would be so proud to know that a member of
9 his post is now the National Commander of the American
10 Legion.

11 I also am grateful that Post 1995 was there when, just
12 a few weeks after I, myself, was wounded, my father passed
13 away, and they helped us, our family, along with the
14 Auxiliary, helped to lay my father to rest in Arlington.
15 Thank you for that.

16 For the Commander and myself, the American Legion plays
17 an important role in our families and is something that is
18 passed down from father to son, mother to daughter. His
19 wife, his son, and his daughter give a great deal to the
20 American Legion. He and his family are passionate about the
21 service the American Legion provides. Because of this, I am
22 not surprised that Commander Dellinger has made the theme of
23 his tenure as Commander, "Building For Tomorrow Today."

24 Whether it is stopping dangerous sequester cuts,
25 working to end veterans' homelessness, or reducing the VA

1 backlog, we need to be working now to better the future of
2 our country and protect our veterans, service members, and
3 military families. Commander Dellinger understands that the
4 American Legion's work is not just to improve the lives of
5 veterans and service members now, but for the years to come.
6 As National Commander, I know that he is ready to begin that
7 work today and I am proud to stand with him in his efforts.

8 God bless the American Legion. God bless our troops
9 who are in harm's way and laying in hospital beds across
10 this great nation. And, always, God bless the United States
11 of America.

12 It is my great pleasure to introduce a great American,
13 Commander Dan Dellinger.

14 [Standing ovation.]

15 Chairman Sanders. Commander, before you begin, and we
16 are so delighted that you are here with us today, would you
17 be so kind as to introduce your leadership team.

1 STATEMENT OF DANIEL M. DELLINGER, NATIONAL
2 COMMANDER, THE AMERICAN LEGION; ACCOMPANIED BY
3 BRETT REISTAD, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL LEGISLATIVE
4 COMMISSION; LOUIS CELLI, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL
5 LEGISLATIVE DIVISION; RALPH BOZELLA, CHAIRMAN,
6 NATIONAL VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION
7 COMMISSION; VERNA JONES, DIRECTOR, NATIONAL
8 VETERANS AFFAIRS AND REHABILITATION DIVISION; DALE
9 BARNETT, CHAIRMAN, NATIONAL ECONOMIC COMMISSION;
10 AND MARK WALKER, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR, NATIONAL
11 ECONOMIC DIVISION

12 Mr. Dellinger. I will. Good morning, Chairman
13 Sanders, Chairman Flores, and members of the Senate and
14 House Committee on Veterans Affairs, and also, I would like
15 to thank Congressman Lieutenant Colonel Tammy Duckworth, a
16 proud Department of Virginia Legionnaire and good friend,
17 for her kind words of introduction and unwavering support of
18 those who have proudly served our nation in uniform.

19 With me at the witness table today is Veterans Affairs
20 and Rehabilitation Commission Chairman Ralph Bozella and
21 Director Verna Jones; National Economic Commission Chairman
22 Dale Barnett and Deputy Director Mark Walker; and National
23 Legislative Commission Chairman Brett Reistad and Director
24 Louis Celli.

25 On behalf of the 2.4 million wartime veterans who make

1 up the American Legion, our nation's largest Veterans
2 Service Organization, I thank you for the opportunity to
3 testify this morning.

4 Before I start, though, I would ask the following
5 people to please stand and be recognized. National officers
6 of the American Legion serving with me this year, please
7 rise.

8 [Applause.]

9 Mr. Dellinger. The American Legion Past National
10 Commanders in the audience.

11 [Applause.]

12 Mr. Dellinger. Nancy Brown Park, National President of
13 the American Legion Auxiliary, and her officers.

14 [Applause.]

15 Mr. Dellinger. And Joseph Gladden, National Commander
16 of the Sons of the American Legion, and his Legislative
17 Chairmen.

18 [Applause.]

19 Mr. Dellinger. I would also like to take this
20 opportunity to introduce and thank my wife and my best
21 friend, my wife, Margaret. Thank you.

22 [Applause.]

23 Mr. Dellinger. We are one American Legion family and
24 we are all in this together. As advocates for veterans and
25 their families, we stand at a critical threshold. More than

1 1.2 million U.S. servicemen and women in the coming four
2 years will make the transition from active duty service to
3 new lives as citizen veterans, many of them greatly changed
4 by their wartime experiences. At the same time, millions of
5 proud veterans from World War II, Korea, Vietnam, and more
6 recent military engagements are aging and looking for us to
7 fulfill our nation's promises of support and gratitude for
8 their sacrifices.

9 Those sacrifices, we can all agree, have purchased the
10 freedoms and protections that make the United States the
11 strongest, safest, and most prosperous nation on the planet.
12 The pre-9/11 and post-9/11 generations of veterans are
13 equally important, and yet, in many ways, they are
14 different. Our shared obligation to meet all of their needs
15 is a complex challenge, and yes, we all share in the
16 obligation to meet this challenge.

17 The greatest, the most important part of serving as
18 National Commander of the American Legion is that I will
19 spend the coming year personally meeting with veterans and
20 military personnel throughout the country and around the
21 world. I will see their faces and I will hear their voices.
22 I will bring back their messages and I will share their
23 concerns with you because they will ask me how the American
24 Legion plans to improve their lives, and inevitably, they
25 will also ask me what Congress and the VA are doing to

1 improve their lives, as well. We all have work to do in
2 order to provide satisfactory answers.

3 Case in point: A recent VA survey reveals that only
4 about half of America's 22.5 million veterans use the
5 government benefits available to them. Worse yet, in that
6 same survey, it showed nearly 60 percent of America's
7 veterans had little or no idea about what VA benefits they
8 may be eligible to receive. I am hopeful that a newly
9 announced information outreach campaign by VA will
10 dramatically improve awareness among veterans and their
11 families, and I enthusiastically offer the American Legion's
12 support to help spread the word.

13 Foremost, veterans are proud of their service and the
14 part they have played in elevating our nation to a position
15 of global leadership. If the VA survey tells us one thing,
16 it is that veterans are not looking for handouts and many of
17 them are not even aware of their benefits. They are simply
18 looking for an education, careers, and the health care
19 services they have earned and deserve.

20 Veterans also fully understand our nation's current
21 fiscal strain, but as former servicemen and women, they are
22 resolute that we must never let sequestration and the
23 ongoing impasse about the Federal deficit weaken our
24 nation's ability to defend and protect Americans or to
25 liberate the oppressed around the world. Veterans

1 understand that a well-equipped military and a reasonable
2 quality of life for those who serve are the foundations of
3 our nation's strength as we navigate our way to economic
4 recovery. As it was after World War II, our recovery
5 depends on well-employed and well-educated veterans.
6 Strides have been made on that front, but we still have a
7 long way to go.

8 According to the most recent Bureau of Labor
9 Statistics, the veteran populations continue to suffer a
10 higher unemployment rate than their non-veteran peers. With
11 the national unemployment rate declining to just over seven
12 percent, our young veteran males are unemployed at more than
13 three times the national rate, a whopping 22 percent.
14 Another disturbing statistic is that while the rest of the
15 nation's unemployment is declining, recently returning post-
16 9/11 veteran unemployment has actually risen another two
17 percent and now is at ten percent unemployed.

18 The American Legion has been at the forefront of
19 efforts to combat veteran joblessness and homelessness and
20 we know we have allies with you in Congress and over at the
21 Department of Veterans Affairs, and I say again, we all
22 share in this obligation.

23 One way the American Legion is confronting this issue
24 is through a nationwide effort to improve licensing and
25 certification for job-seeking veterans. Combat medics who

1 patched up wounded in Afghanistan should fully be recognized
2 to provide similar services to citizens in their hometowns
3 across America. EMTs who were trained by our military
4 should not have to start the training process over again
5 after they come home from war. That just does not make
6 sense.

7 Some military skills are easier than others to transfer
8 and to credit towards certification, like Commercial Drivers
9 Licensing. Congress recognized this last year and partnered
10 with the American Legion to draft the Military Commercial
11 Drivers License Act, which was signed into law last October.

12 By no means is this a new issue. The American Legion
13 has a long history of working to improve transferability of
14 military experience into certification credit for civilian
15 career fields. In 1997, the American Legion study on
16 licensure and certification for veterans produced data that
17 is still reliable today, but laws and policies to address
18 these findings have been too slow in coming. A decade and a
19 half after that research, only now are we starting to see
20 results.

21 And with progress such as the recent Vow to Hire Heroes
22 Act and the Veterans Skill Job Act of 2012, it is clear to
23 us that you have heard our concerns. We greatly appreciate
24 all you are now doing to improve the situation on the
25 Federal level. Now, we need your leadership at the State

1 level as we continue to work with governments and industry
2 agencies throughout the country to improve acceptance of
3 military training as credit towards certification, just as
4 the Federal Government has. Legislation like the Hire at
5 Home Act can stimulate State-level efforts to recognize
6 military training when veterans come home looking for
7 specialized careers after separation.

8 With nearly 14,000 local posts across the nation, the
9 American Legion is uniquely situated and fully capable of
10 raising awareness and building support for such
11 improvements. We are proud to report that through American
12 Legion grassroots efforts, in collaboration with the
13 Department of Defense, the National Governors Association,
14 and the National Conference of State Legislatures has
15 produced 17 new State laws to help service members receive
16 licensure and academic credit for military training and
17 experience. Some of those States are represented right here
18 by committee members in this room.

19 And while California has yet to pass any of these new
20 laws, they have a number of military transferability
21 measures on the table. And with the support of the
22 California committee members here today, we are hopeful that
23 these State bills will soon become law.

24 Legionnaires and members of Congress can provide
25 important support for another State-level issue, the

1 granting of in-State tuition rates for military members,
2 their families, and veterans, so they can maximize their
3 G.I. Bill benefits, complete their education, and make
4 successful career transitions. We especially want to thank
5 the House Committee on Veterans Affairs and Chairman Miller
6 for his leadership on this matter by introducing the G.I.
7 Bill Tuition Fairness Act.

8 Meanwhile, as we share in the obligation to help
9 veterans and their families find careers worthy of their
10 service and skill sets, another issue that has been high on
11 the American Legion's agenda for too long simply must be
12 resolved, the backlog of undecided VA benefits claims. When
13 speaking to the American Legion at their National Convention
14 in 2010, 2011, 2012, and again in 2013, VA Secretary Eric
15 Shinseki declared VA would break the back of the backlog by
16 2015. He committed to a 98 percent accuracy rate with no
17 claim pending longer than 125 days.

18 In the two years that have followed that initial
19 commitment, VA generally went backwards, both in terms of
20 backlog numbers and accuracy. We are optimistic that recent
21 efforts to move beyond an outdated paper-based processing
22 system will help the Secretary reach his goal of eliminating
23 the backlog of undecided claims, but unfortunately, accuracy
24 remains a serious problem.

25 VA Regional Office site visits and field research

1 conducted by the American Legion have clearly shown that 98
2 percent accuracy goal is far from being met. VA has been
3 reluctant to publicly post accuracy figures in its weekly
4 workload reports, but their own STAR reports for accuracy
5 place the rate in the mid-80s, and the American Legion's
6 Regional Office Action Review Teams are finding even greater
7 error rates, as high as two-thirds of those claims reviewed.
8 That is unacceptable. And, again, we all share an
9 obligation to correct the problem.

10 The American Legion has around 2,600 Veterans Service
11 Officers at work right now all across the nation helping
12 veterans free of charge with VA benefits claims
13 applications. It is a proven fact that those who use our
14 Service Officers submit better prepared applications with
15 reduced errors which eliminates time consuming demands for
16 additional documentation before life-changing adjudication
17 decisions can be made for these veterans. I implore VA and
18 Congress to engage our Service Officers in the process to
19 define and execute a solution to the backlog. No one knows
20 those claims better than the American Legion Service
21 Officers.

22 Improved accuracy is critical to speeding up the
23 process, and the American Legion believes that the VA work
24 credit system that rewards processors for the raw quantity
25 of claims they complete in a given time span, regardless of

1 accuracy, only leads to disputes and appeals that leave
2 claims unresolved for months and sometimes even years,
3 adding to the backlog. The American Legion would like to
4 see the work credit system reformed to measure process
5 performance based on the number of claims completed without
6 errors and in a timely manner.

7 When a VA benefit claim is hung up in the process,
8 someone who has served our nation in uniform is denied
9 access to health care services entitled to them by law.
10 Veterans are often left to wonder, is VA simply waiting for
11 me to die before deciding my claim? And with this, too, we
12 all share in the obligation to change that suspicion.

13 The American Legion also supports this committee
14 through our strong support of finally implementing a single
15 seamless lifetime Electronic Medical Record that can be
16 accessed by DOD or VA at any time without need for
17 additional software. Congress has already appropriated
18 billions of dollars to accomplish this important step into
19 the 21st century technology, but the fact that we are now
20 back to square one, quite frankly, is an embarrassment.

21 The American Legion is not standing idly by. As
22 stakeholders in the VA claims process, we see our
23 organization, and in particular our Service Officers,
24 necessary participants in this solution. In June, the
25 American Legion, together with the White House, joined

1 forces--and VA--all joined to advance a fully developed
2 claims process nationwide, and so far, that collaboration
3 has proven very effective in the effort to bring down the
4 backlog.

5 As you have seen, the American Legion is not simply
6 going to stand back and complain about the problem. We are
7 working every day to solve it, one veteran at a time. Every
8 year, American Legion Service Officers assist veterans with
9 more than 540,000 disability claims and another 164,000
10 death benefit claims, all at no cost to the veteran. The
11 American Legion takes this part of our shared obligation
12 very seriously. Our Service Officers have the expertise and
13 dedication to make a difference and they are doing so every
14 day.

15 As I meet with veterans and active duty servicemen and
16 women this year, I am also certain to hear concerns about
17 the Federal budget and sequestration. Veterans have been
18 assured by the President and Congress that VA will be
19 protected from cuts. The American Legion has often asked
20 for reassurance about this and we have continued to receive
21 it from Congress, especially the House and Senate Committees
22 on Veterans Affairs.

23 As these committees know very well, VA major
24 construction is a discretionary cost. While we are pleased
25 to see that VA is finally back in the hospital building

1 business where new medical centers are needed, the fact
2 remains that the average structure is over a half-a-century
3 old and out of step with modern science and in serious need
4 of major and minor construction alike. Veterans need
5 assurance from Congress and the White House that facilities
6 needs are included among VA's protections against
7 sequestration.

8 We also have not received adequate assurance that our
9 nation's military retirees and active duty personnel are
10 protected from the cuts. The specter of reduced services
11 and increased rates for TRICARE haunts our nation's military
12 retirees. A weaker military health care system is not the
13 solution to our nation's budget problems. The message we
14 want--

15 [Applause.]

16 Mr. Dellinger. The message we want you to carry to the
17 Armed Services Committees and DOD could not be more clear.
18 Military retirees are veterans, too, so leave retiree
19 benefits and TRICARE alone.

20 [Applause.]

21 Mr. Dellinger. Our military, our military retirees,
22 and our veterans are symbols of this nation's strength.
23 Sequestration was blamed in June for a noticeable lack of
24 U.S. military presence at the massive D-Day anniversary
25 commemorations in Normandy, France. Immediate Past National

1 Commander James Koutz was one of the few American
2 dignitaries in Normandy to accept the gratitude of the
3 liberated. World War II veterans sat quietly at ceremonies
4 and listened to a German military band play our national
5 anthem while French officials were openly asking, where are
6 the Americans?

7 We certainly hope our nation and our military will be
8 better represented in Normandy in 2014 when the invasion's
9 70th anniversary is recognized. Remembrance of Americans
10 who gave their lives for the freedoms of others is a sacred
11 obligation. We all share in it.

12 [Applause.]

13 Mr. Dellinger. The bottom line is this. The American
14 Legion is calling on lawmakers to protect from the budget
15 axe our nation's veterans, military retirees, and troops
16 still serving during wartime. We owe it to the heroes under
17 the gray markers at the Normandy American Cemetery,
18 Arlington, and elsewhere around the world to keep our
19 military the strongest in the world and deliver to our
20 veterans the gratitude we owe them.

21 While the budget does not fall squarely on the
22 shoulders of these committees, we urge you to work with your
23 colleagues to find compromises necessary to set the country
24 on a path to stability and to ensure that the remaining 14
25 percent of the VA budget be included in advance

1 appropriations. By doing so, we can remove some of the
2 uncertainty among veterans and military retirees. By doing
3 so, we can count on the structural and infrastructure
4 support necessary to ensure that our veterans and military
5 health care facilities are modern, well maintained, and
6 located within a reasonable distance of those who need them.
7 And by doing so, we can meet the needs of veterans, pre-9/11
8 and post-9/11, who need us now at this critical juncture.
9 That includes our most severely wounded. It includes those
10 confronting PTSD and TBI. It includes women veterans, who
11 only now are beginning to see meaningful changes in the VA
12 health care. We cannot let a dysfunctional appropriations
13 process let these veterans down. We all share in that
14 obligation.

15 And, finally, any discussion of the wars in Afghanistan
16 and Iraq must address what has become known as the signature
17 wounds of those wars, post-traumatic stress disorder and
18 traumatic brain injury. Since 2010, the American Legion's
19 TBI and PTSD Ad Hoc Committee has worked closely with mental
20 health experts, physicians, DOD, VA, and veterans suffering
21 from these conditions to produce a list of findings and
22 recommendations that can be found in my written testimony.
23 In short, the American Legion committee found that the
24 current PTSD and TBI screening and identification procedures
25 are inadequate and existing treatment programs are lacking.

1 The committee recommends Congressional funding and
2 oversight, increased research, and acceptance of a policy
3 that those affected with PTSD or TBI be prescribed only FDA-
4 approved medications. The American Legion's TBI and PTSD Ad
5 Hoc Committee will continue to work towards advancing our
6 knowledge and understanding of today's signature wounds so
7 we can provide DOD, VA, and Congress with all
8 recommendations necessary to serve them.

9 Our challenge is great and it is complicated. As we
10 have for nearly a century, the American Legion stands to
11 take it on. Working in collaboration with Congress, VA, and
12 the White House, and the veterans of our nation, to all who
13 have sworn with their lives to protect and defend our
14 nation, we owe the fulfillment of our shared and sacred
15 obligation. I thank you for the opportunity to come before
16 you to renew the American Legion's ongoing commitment to
17 work closely with your committees so we can do what is right
18 for those who have served to whom we owe so much.

19 Thank you. God bless you all. God bless the troops
20 everywhere. And God bless these United States of America.

21 [Standing ovation.]

22 [The prepared statement of Mr. Dellinger follows:]

1 Chairman Sanders. Commander, thank you very much for
2 that very thoughtful testimony which touched on so many
3 issues that impact the lives of our veterans.

4 Let me start off. I am going to ask questions first
5 and other members will follow. Early in your remarks, you
6 touched on something that I think does not get enough
7 discussion, and that is that there are many veterans all
8 over this country who are simply not aware of the benefits
9 to which they are entitled. They may choose not to take
10 them, but they should at least know them.

11 As I pointed out in my remarks, I believe we are making
12 some progress, but I would like your thoughts or your
13 staff's thoughts about how we can do better in enabling
14 every man and woman who has served this country to know what
15 they are entitled to. What ideas do you have on outreach?

16 Mr. Dellinger. Well, Senator, we have been studying
17 this and we have been working with VA and, really, our
18 Veterans Affairs Director, Verna Jones, has been working
19 very closely with them, and I would like for her to explain
20 at this time what you have progressed with.

21 Ms. Jones. Thank you. Thank you very much. That is
22 very important for us, awareness. We need for every veteran
23 to understand that they have benefits. They served their
24 country. They served their country honorably. And they
25 deserve those benefits.

1 One of the things that we are working on right now is
2 writing a resolution. Being participants in the TAPS
3 program, it is important that we get out there and we let
4 veterans know as they transition from military life to
5 veterans what benefits are available for them. We have many
6 programs, as the Commander talked about, our Regional Office
7 Action Review Visits and our System Worth Saving Visits, and
8 we go out to the hospitals, to the Regional Offices, and we
9 try to talk to veterans who are there to tell them about the
10 benefits that are entitled to them. We also go to the
11 different departments within the American Legion and talk to
12 our fellow Legionnaires about benefits that are available so
13 they can continue to pass that message on to veterans. And
14 one of the things that we tell our staff is, talk to every
15 veteran that you see. Let them know. Word of mouth is an
16 important source of information.

17 Chairman Sanders. Right. My impression is that we are
18 making some progress. We are doing better than we have in
19 the past, but we still have a long way to go. Is that your
20 general impression?

21 Mr. Dellinger. Yes, it is. Especially with the TAP
22 programs, we are finding a dysfunction there. Some are at a
23 high level, but others, especially our Reserve and National
24 Guard components that are embedded within our units, when
25 they come back, they get no training. There is nothing for

1 us, no way for us to get to them before they actually come
2 back to their hometown.

3 Chairman Sanders. Okay. Let me ask you another
4 question, sort of a controversial question, if you like, but
5 I would like your feelings on it. I happen to think that
6 the VA, which is the largest integrated health care system
7 in the United States, some six million veterans using it, is
8 a reasonably good system. It has its problems, but it is a
9 pretty good system. I think if you talk to most veterans
10 who access it, they think it is pretty good.

11 Right now, to a significant degree, the VA health care
12 system focuses on folks with service-connected problems,
13 which it obviously should, and also lower-income veterans.
14 In the State of Vermont, if you are single, if you are above
15 about, more or less, \$28,000, you are not eligible for VA
16 health care.

17 Commander, there have been over the years a lot of
18 discussion about this issue. Sometimes in the past, the
19 system has been open to any veteran. Sometimes, it has been
20 closed. Some of us think that it might be a good idea to
21 start rethinking these income levels again and maybe open up
22 the system somewhat more. What do you think?

23 Mr. Dellinger. The American Legion, we realize that we
24 need to take care of every single man and woman that put the
25 uniform on to defend our great country and they should all

1 receive health care. We have resolutions that support that
2 issue.

3 [Applause.]

4 Chairman Sanders. So what I am hearing you say, it is
5 the position of the American Legion that the doors of VA
6 health care should be open to every veteran in America, is
7 that right?

8 Mr. Dellinger. Yes, sir.

9 Chairman Sanders. Okay.

10 [Applause.]

11 Chairman Sanders. A last very brief question. I am
12 running out of time. You correctly put your finger on a
13 very, very important issue, is our economy is struggling.
14 Everybody knows that. And everybody knows that people who
15 went overseas to Iraq and Afghanistan not only put their
16 lives on the line, they put their economic futures on the
17 line. They left their jobs.

18 Can you or your staff members be kind of specific as to
19 what role you think the Federal Government might be playing
20 in making sure that those people who have sacrificed so much
21 do not have to continue to sacrifice in terms of loss of
22 income and unemployment? What ideas do you have?

23 Mr. Dellinger. Our Economics Division has been doing a
24 great job partnering with the Chamber of Commerce and
25 running job fairs. We recently just had our National

1 Convention in Houston. We had over 600 possible employees
2 come in, and out of that one-day job fair, we had 400 people
3 that were offered positions from private sectors.

4 [Applause.]

5 Mr. Dellinger. But we have with us Mark Walker, who
6 heads up that particular aspect of our economics division,
7 and I would like for him to expound upon that.

8 Chairman Sanders. Thank you.

9 Mr. Walker. As the Commander said, we are involved in
10 job fairs, but also, we are employed in employment workshops
11 as well as providing small business development workshops,
12 as well. So if a veteran chooses to go and wants to start a
13 business or expand a business through the Federal
14 Government, we do that, as well. We hold these job fairs,
15 as well, in our posts. So there are a lot of different
16 things that we are trying to do to make sure that, again,
17 they have that sort of financial independence as they
18 transition.

19 Again, we are partnering with folks, with the U.S.
20 Chamber, other companies, to make sure that the private
21 sector understands sort of what we do in the military and
22 sort of fill that gap, to make sure that these folks,
23 whether it is infantry or IT or anywhere else, is that they
24 are capable and able to be proficient and efficient on their
25 jobs in the civilian workforce.

1 So, again, we are working on a multitude of levels. We
2 love the Post-9/11 G.I. Bill. We love what is happening on
3 the credentialing level. We love what is happening in
4 Federal homelessness to make suer that these folks can get
5 not just off the street, but into employment. So we are
6 going to stay in that fight as long as we can.

7 Chairman Sanders. Mr. Walker thank you very much.

8 Senator Isakson.

9 Senator Isakson. Well, thank you very much, Mr.
10 Chairman.

11 Commander Dellinger, I want to focus on your focus on
12 mental health and PTSD and TBI. And, first of all, I want
13 to commend you on making your Ad Hoc Committee on TBI and
14 PTSD a permanent committee of the American Legion because it
15 is a permanent problem for our veterans. In fact, we have
16 learned that it is the signature wound of the Afghani
17 conflict and the Iraqi conflict. But, in fact, it is a
18 wound that was done in Vietnam, in Korea, and in other
19 conflicts. In fact, the issue that came to national light
20 in terms of the suicides at the Atlanta VA back earlier this
21 year, two of those three cases were Vietnam-era veterans
22 that committed suicide, not Iraqi or Afghanistan veterans.
23 So it is a permanent problem and it is something we must
24 focus on.

25 I also want to commend you on looking at the

1 pharmaceuticals that are being used in treating some of
2 these, Risperidone, in particular, which has, as you pointed
3 out in your testimony, some questionable results. We found-
4 -and I am making a little bit of a speech here and I
5 apologize for that, but what I am trying to reinforce is how
6 on target the American Legion as a group and you as a
7 Commander are on this terrible problem.

8 We found in Atlanta, at the Atlanta VA, that many of
9 the problems in terms of treating people with PTSD and TBI
10 who might be at risk for their lives is early
11 identification, first of all.

12 Second of all, when identification takes place, the
13 ability to track that veteran so you see to it they go from
14 their initial interview and their initial treatment to the
15 follow-up treatments without interruption. And we found
16 that is necessary to create cooperatives within the
17 communities and use best practices and also use private
18 providers who are willing to assist the VA in dealing with
19 the mental health traumas that are coming out of these
20 conflicts.

21 So your Ad Hoc Committee will be of tremendous value to
22 us on the committee as we develop and improve on our current
23 systems.

24 I want to commend the DOD for the implementation of
25 Warrior Transition Centers, for the privacy that active duty

1 personnel now have in terms of answering difficult
2 questions, the answer to which oftentimes leads
3 professionals to know that they have a TBI or PTSD problem
4 or potential problem. Knowledge is power, and the
5 transition from service in the military to being a veteran
6 has to be seamless when it comes to health care. When DOD
7 hands off that veteran, the Veterans Administration and
8 Veterans Health Care must be ready to receive him. The
9 records that you say must be transferrable, and information
10 technology allows us to have seamless VA records, or medical
11 records, and we have got to ensure that that happens.

12 I would like for you to comment for a minute on your
13 own knowledge of how big this problem is and how we must
14 confront it and we must face it in terms of TBI, PTSD, and
15 suicide.

16 Mr. Dellinger. Well, we, the American Legion, hold
17 Service Officer training, and what I have heard from some of
18 the Service Officers about this--and that is what really
19 focused me on this--was, but also, we have a member, our VNR
20 Chairman, who has been on that Ad Hoc Committee since day
21 one, and he is better equipped to answer your question on
22 that and I would ask him if he would respond.

23 Senator Isakson. Please.

24 Mr. Bozella. Mr. Isakson, thank you, sir. Most of the
25 PTSD research in the Department of Defense and VA have only

1 validated the current evidence-based treatments. And just
2 like the discovery of penicillin was once considered an
3 alternative treatment, there are many alternative treatments
4 now in mental health and this is perhaps a time where
5 investments need to be made on what are these alternative
6 treatments? Are they really working?

7 In our System Worth Saving Task Force, we are in 15 to
8 20 VA hospitals a year, and no matter what our topic is, we
9 do evaluate mental health practices in current VA settings.
10 And what we are finding is the VA, at the local setting, the
11 health care professionals are using alternative treatments,
12 things like acupuncture--Senator Sanders, you mentioned that
13 this morning--art, music, equestrian, tai chi, yoga,
14 hyperbaric chambers. All these things are taking place in
15 and out of the VA that are associated with veterans, and
16 they are all having success to one degree or another. The
17 success is measured anecdotally. There is not scientific
18 evidence-based research on these methods.

19 And perhaps, again, that is what we need to do, because
20 what we are doing is allowing veterans the opportunity to
21 choose some of their therapies, whereas the multiple drug
22 use and the psychotherapy is the only thing that the VA
23 sanctions, if you will. So it is time to open that door and
24 then provide the research and it is time for the VA to
25 recognize their own hospitals are doing some of this stuff

1 and it is working.

2 Senator Isakson. Thank you very much, Mr. Bozella.

3 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

4 Chairman Sanders. Congressman Michaud.

5 Mr. Michaud. Thank you very much, Mr. Chairman, and
6 thank you once again, Commander, for being here.

7 Commander, in your testimony, you discussed the need
8 for the VA to look at how they measure accuracy in the
9 claims process. What are your thoughts as it relates to the
10 claims process, looking at the medical condition level and
11 improving claims at the medical condition level versus
12 waiting for a claim to be completely dealt with? If you
13 look at, on average, comparing World War II, Vietnam,
14 compared to Iraq and Afghanistan, there are much more
15 medical conditions now that our current warriors are
16 affected by. So would you comment on the medical condition,
17 having the claims proved at that level.

18 Mr. Dellinger. We have been working with VA on this
19 because of the--because the amount--I mean, as you
20 mentioned, during World War II and Korea and Vietnam, there
21 may have been one or two aspects, but now some of these have
22 as much as 19 or even more. Actually, again, Verna Jones is
23 more of an expert on this than I am and I would like for you
24 to have the best possible answer there, so--

25 Ms. Jones. Thank you. One of the things that we have

1 talked to the VA about is to grant the claims that they can
2 grant right away. If the medical information is there, if
3 the evidence is there, grant that claim and defer the rest
4 of the claim. No need to wait, if the veteran has multiple
5 conditions that they have claimed, to wait until they can
6 complete that claim in its entirety. Get those claims
7 granted. Get some help, some medical benefits and funds
8 going to the home of that veteran until the VA can
9 accurately complete the rest of the claim.

10 Mr. Michaud. Thank you.

11 The American Legion, you have taken a proactive role
12 and actually have engaged the VA to implement the fully
13 developed claims effort, and this will actually go a long
14 ways as far as avoiding continued growth in the backlog
15 claims area. Are there other areas that the American
16 Legion, efforts that you are going through that you would
17 like to partner with the VA to address the backlog issue or
18 any other issue, such as health care access for women?

19 Mr. Dellinger. Of course, we need to have more access
20 for women veterans. It is important. I mean, we have only
21 hit on the tip of the iceberg with them. I mean, as I
22 stated in my testimony, there are only very few of them at
23 this time utilizing the VA system for numerous reasons.
24 Distrust is one. But it is an awareness, I think, also.
25 But, also, I think the paperless claims, if we can get into

1 that aspect, we will see the amount of claims could be
2 processed quicker, and oversight to make sure that there is
3 no waste in that area. But also work credits, that the
4 processors need to have a--to be challenged. They need to
5 do the claims in a timely manner and increase their
6 accuracy, and that only comes through oversight.

7 I will also pass off to Verna if there is anything else
8 there that I have missed on this, but--

9 Ms. Jones. Thank you. The Commander is absolutely
10 right. We want to talk about the work credit system. In
11 June of this year--I think it was June 28--we testified, and
12 in that testimony, we talked about the work credit system
13 and helping reduce the backlog. The American Legion
14 believes that if we help revamp, or if the VA revamps the
15 work credit system, then it will become more productive. As
16 is, we believe that the work credit system is
17 counterproductive to helping those claims get through the
18 system timely and accurately.

19 When an employee of the VA has to make a decision on
20 whether they go out for more information, do more
21 development, or get their work credit points that will help
22 them continue to get promoted or make their quota, most
23 times, that employee is going to make sure that they stay in
24 good standings with their employment. We understand that.

25 So to help revamp the work credit system so that the

1 veteran gets what the veteran needs and deserves is
2 important. And the American Legion, as a matter of fact,
3 has a meeting with Ranking Member Titus, with her staffers,
4 to talk about that work credit system and how we are going
5 to work with the VA to help revamp that system.

6 Mr. Michaud. Okay. Thank you.

7 And the last issue I wanted to touch upon, since I am
8 running out of time, I know on September 18, the House
9 Veterans Affairs Committee, we are having actually a
10 roundtable discussion to look at not only the short-term
11 issues, but that roundtable discussion is to look at the
12 long-term veterans strategy. My biggest fear is as we draw
13 down in Afghanistan, with the budget problems that we are
14 facing as a country, that, not right off, but about four or
15 five years down the road, Congress might say, well, we are
16 no longer at war or in any conflict so, therefore, we can
17 start cutting back, and that is my biggest fear of what is
18 going to happen here at the national level.

19 So I look forward to working with the American Legion
20 to look at that long-term veterans strategy as a country
21 that we have to make sure that we keep out there in the
22 forefront, even if we are not in conflict, I envision the
23 ongoing costs will continue to rise, particularly taking
24 care of veterans from Iraq and Afghanistan with post-
25 traumatic stress and traumatic brain injuries. So, I look

1 forward to working with you as we move forward for that
2 longer-term strategy that we must keep in the forefront for
3 the VA and the American people.

4 So, once again, I want to thank you, Commander, for
5 your testimony today and look forward to working with you.
6 Thank you.

7 Mr. Dellinger. And we also look forward to partnering,
8 because we are here for the long run. We feel it is better
9 to be proactive than reactive, and it seems like that is the
10 mode we have been in lately and we need to get back, and I
11 hope that that roundtable assists in that.

12 Chairman Sanders. Congressman Roe.

13 Mr. Roe. I thank the Chairman, and Commander, thank
14 you. You would not be here and be successful if it were not
15 for that nice lady sitting behind you, Margaret, so thank
16 her very much, and the Auxiliary. None of us would be
17 successful without our spouses.

18 Mr. Dellinger. Very true, sir.

19 Mr. Roe. I also thank the previous Commanders for the
20 work you have done, and you are my Commander. I am a member
21 of Post 183 in Sneedville, Tennessee, among many other posts
22 in my district, I might add.

23 I want to--if Bob Hensley [phonetic] is here, Bob is a
24 friend from Mountain City, and if there are any Tennesseans,
25 would you all stand, and thank them. Bob, thank you, and--

1 [Applause.]

2 Mr. Roe. I want to point out that, to my good friend,
3 Bill Flores, there would not be a Texas if it were not for
4 Tennessee. I want to make that--

5 [Laughter.]

6 Mr. Roe. I will tell you, one of the things, Mike,
7 that you brought up I think is very important, and as you go
8 back, try to elect more veterans to the Congress. Less than
9 20 percent of us have served--

10 Mr. Dellinger. That is true.

11 Mr. Roe. --and we have a different view, veterans do,
12 than--and my wife is as patriotic as any human being on this
13 earth, but you just--my gig line is still straight, if you
14 look at this morning, from my time in the service.

15 Let me very quickly go over a few things that have
16 frustrated me since the five years I have been here. This
17 VA Committee was a perfect fit for me. I am a veteran. I
18 am a physician. I have a VA hospital a mile from my front
19 door in Johnson City, Tennessee. And to brag on the VA,
20 they do a lot of things right. We talk about the things
21 they do wrong, but they also do a lot of things right and
22 help a lot of veterans through some very tough times.

23 And just very quickly, I got the privilege of going
24 back to Korea, where I served 40 years ago, this past year,
25 and basically, I saw a country that was digging out from a

1 war at the end of the Korean War. I was there in 1973 and
2 1974. We crossed paths about the same time in the service.
3 Today, there are 50 million free people because of what you
4 out there, you veterans did, and the Korean people asked me
5 to thank every veteran that they could because of the
6 country they have. In 1960, the fourth poorest country in
7 the world. Today, the eighth largest economy. So thank you
8 for what you did.

9 [Applause.]

10 Mr. Roe. You know, Commander, you mentioned an
11 embarrassment, the EMR embarrassment. That was an expensive
12 embarrassment, and I think until we get that fixed where you
13 can have a virtual lifetime Electronic Health Record, you
14 will never see this problem solved, the backlog problem. I
15 saw the picture in your magazine here and I have been to
16 Detroit and looked at those stacks of paper. It is the most
17 daunting thing I have ever seen in my life, to go through
18 all that. It is time consuming and the inaccuracies are
19 terrible. And thank you for your Service Officers who help
20 navigate soldiers through that.

21 Another problem we have got to do is we have got to
22 make sure, since, as the Chairman said, our resources are
23 limited, we have got to make sure we spend them wisely, and
24 the service-connected veteran-owned small business, we in
25 the oversight and investigation, we found three out of four

1 businesses did not even qualify. And that means a veteran
2 who should have had that business did not get that business.
3 So that is us, Congress. We need to do a better job, and I
4 certainly think we hear you loud and clear on that.

5 One question I have for you, and this goes very near
6 and dear to my heart, building hospitals, since I have been
7 involved in building three, and I know you certainly in your
8 previous life--I know your background. You know, the VA has
9 a hard time building new medical centers within the cost and
10 schedule. Most of the recent hospital constructions have
11 been delayed and skyrocketing cost overruns. And as someone
12 like yourself who has spent decades running a successful
13 construction and general contracting business, what advice
14 can you give the VA about ensuring these hospitals are built
15 on time and on budget, because that takes away from care
16 that we could be giving to veterans.

17 Mr. Dellinger. Well, construction is not an easy
18 thing. You need to have a team that is put together. They
19 need to be together from day one, and a lot of times, you do
20 not get that with the Federal procurement process. And
21 having done some government work, I am fully aware of what
22 it is. I have a question. Should VA actually be building
23 hospitals?

24 Actually, our Chairman down here, Mr. Bozella, he is
25 intimately familiar with the overruns at Denver at this

1 point and I would wonder if he could add something to that.

2 Mr. Bozella. Thank you, Commander and Mr. Roe. You
3 know, there are four VA hospitals being constructed
4 currently, or just finished, Orlando, New Orleans, Denver,
5 and Las Vegas, and the GAO report shows that each facility
6 is at least \$366 million over initial cost estimates and an
7 average of a 35-month delay. And only Las Vegas is
8 considered finished, and I know there are issues there.
9 They are not fully operable yet. And all four projects have
10 cost more and encountered more delays than anyone expected.

11 In Denver, we have our own unique set of problems of
12 which Mr. Coffman is very aware of. The joint venture
13 contractor, Keeva Turner, has taken its client, the VA, to
14 the United States Civilian Board of Contract Appeals. Keeva
15 Turner maintains it cannot build the hospital for the \$604
16 million fixed target price that it has set. The term "fixed
17 target price" we, as veterans, find incongruent to begin
18 with, and that is really the crux of the problem. They
19 never had a real price to work with, and that is wherein
20 most of that trouble lies. And of all the four projects
21 that are underway right now, Denver may be in the most
22 trouble, and that troubles us the most as Denver veterans.

23 You know, the VA is very good at health care. I am a
24 patient in the VA system. And maybe it is time that the VA
25 consider that they stick to health care and maybe allow

1 someone else to build hospitals.

2 Mr. Roe. Thank you all for being here today.

3 [Applause.]

4 Mr. Roe. Mr. Chairman, I yield back.

5 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much.

6 Congressman Brownley.

7 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you,
8 Commander, for your testimony today. I certainly want to
9 thank you and all the members of the American Legion for
10 your service to our country and your commitment to our
11 nation's veterans, and most importantly, your advocacy to
12 our country to make sure that we are doing the right thing
13 for each and every one of our veterans and our families.
14 And I just want to say to all of you that you remain our
15 heroes and "sheroes" of our country, so thank you for your
16 service.

17 Mr. Dellinger. Thank you.

18 Ms. Brownley. I am concerned with the over-
19 representation of veterans among our homeless population and
20 have introduced legislation, H.R. 2485, to extend the
21 authorization for a year to several homeless veteran
22 programs, just to name a few, the Health Care for Homeless
23 Veterans Programs, the Therapeutic Transitional Housing
24 Component to the Compensation Work Therapy Program, the
25 Incarcerated Veterans Transition Program, the Homeless

1 Veterans Reintegration Program, and the Supportive Services
2 for Veteran Families Program. There are more, but that is
3 just to name a few.

4 If you could just take a moment to discuss your opinion
5 on these programs around our nation's homeless veteran
6 population and what sort of impact this would have, and
7 should these programs expire, in your opinion, at the end of
8 the year--well, the programs will expire at the end of the
9 year without Congressional action and what your opinion is.

10 Mr. Dellinger. Well, first off, I would like to see
11 that extended to five years, for starters. I mean, the
12 pilot programs are running well. We are getting homeless
13 veterans off the streets and that is the most important. If
14 this was, of course, to end at the end of the year, we would
15 see an increase of those veterans going back on the streets,
16 and we have made great strides with our homeless veterans.
17 We make great strides with all homeless across the country,
18 and that is the right thing to do, to get every single
19 veteran off the streets, and it would definitely impact if
20 these were to go away.

21 But we need that funding and oversight to make sure
22 that these pilot programs are run seamlessly and that they
23 are most effective. You do not have room there for error
24 when you are talking about a homeless veteran because just
25 that little thing could put them back on the streets again.

1 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, sir.

2 I also wanted to know if you would be sort of willing
3 to comment on the GAO review of the accuracy of the
4 administration's advance budget projections. You know that
5 the 111th Congress passed legislation to do this, to preview
6 and assure the accuracy of the administration's advance
7 budget projections, and I was wondering if you could just
8 comment, as well. I have tried to move forward some work,
9 and I know our committee has marked up a bill, H.R. 813,
10 that includes provisions to extend the GAO reporting
11 requirement, but I was wondering if you might be able to
12 comment on that, as well.

13 Mr. Dellinger. Actually, I was just having a
14 discussion yesterday afternoon about that exact subject, and
15 our Legislative Director, Lou Celli, has been in
16 conversations about this, and he is prepared to answer your
17 question.

18 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, sir.

19 Mr. Celli. Well, Congresswoman, thank you very much
20 for the question, and as you know, the last time I was
21 before you with this microphone, I promised you that when we
22 got to Houston, that we would examine that very issue. We
23 have. And, again, the American Legion likes good things.
24 The GAO report is a good thing and we like the GAO report.
25 We would like to see it extended.

1 Ms. Brownley. Thank you, sir.

2 Thank you, Mr. Chair.

3 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much.

4 Congressman Coffman.

5 Mr. Coffman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

6 Ralph Bozella, you and I have worked on the hospital
7 issue back home in Colorado and I echo the concerns
8 expressed here today among the leadership at the table, and
9 that is the Veterans Administration is a health care
10 provider and probably not a construction entity. I think,
11 as they have proven--and, Ralph, you mentioned the four
12 examples out of the Government Accountability Office report
13 that came out in April that said all four were over budget,
14 were behind schedule in terms of their completion and their
15 cost. And I think it also referenced a couple
16 organizations, the Army Corps of Engineers being one of
17 them, that consistently build similar facilities for the
18 Federal Government within cost and on schedule. And so I
19 would hope, going forward, that you all would take a second
20 look at that issue and if there is legislation, which I
21 think we can assume that there will be, to have your support
22 for that.

23 One question that I have is should the--do you think
24 that a physical examination, a mandatory one, be required
25 for all departing service members, to include those who are

1 leaving the Guard and Reserve, if anybody would like to
2 comment on that.

3 Mr. Dellinger. I definitely feel that the American
4 Legion, that each veteran should get the best health care
5 possible, and with a physical, it would, number one, help
6 them as they process out and with the paperless claims.
7 Then it would be on record and any information gained would
8 be helpful in determining what a veteran could actually, or
9 a departing service member, the benefits could be, if any.

10 Mr. Coffman. Okay. In leaving active duty, I always
11 remember getting a physical. But when I separated--when I
12 retired from the Reserves, I did not receive any kind of
13 comprehensive physical. And so if I were to have issues
14 later on where I would apply to be looked at by the VA as an
15 issue that might be service connected, there really is no
16 fundamental record except going back only to my active duty
17 periods of service.

18 Another question is when we talk about this claims
19 backlog and how to move it forward, one thing that I look at
20 is to say, why do we not have specialization within the
21 Veterans Administration on the specific types of claims? In
22 other words, have one individual with the VA that does
23 processing of claims that specializes in Agent Orange claims
24 only, one person that does post-traumatic stress disorder
25 only, and so on and so forth. I just think that having that

1 kind of specialization at the end of the day would not only
2 expedite the claims but might also give more certainty to
3 the decisions at the end of the day.

4 I think there are a lot of great people in the Veterans
5 Administration that we do not compliment enough, as
6 Congressman Roe just has done, but we are not moving these
7 claims fast enough, and I wonder if any of you would like to
8 comment on the notion of having specialized claims
9 individuals at the first echelon of the process.

10 Mr. Dellinger. Well, I would like to defer to Verna
11 Jones, who is in charge of our Service Officers, and she can
12 give you more information on that.

13 Ms. Jones. Thank you. Thank you very much for your
14 question. It is important that the employees who process
15 those claims are experts in exactly what they are doing.
16 That is one of the things we found with the segmented lanes
17 with fully developed claims. That is why the fully
18 developed claims process so far, and what we see from our
19 quality review visits, is working, is because they take a
20 group of people who work with particular claims and become
21 experts in what they are doing.

22 So it is important that they have those employees
23 specialize in a particular area so they know exactly how to
24 adjudicate those claims. I believe that it will cut down
25 and minimize the errors that are being made in those

1 particular claims and help speed up the process.

2 And we have seen that with our visits. We have gone
3 out to eight Regional Offices to do exactly--to do
4 specifically fully developed claims quality review visits,
5 and with seeing that group of people work on those specific
6 claims, we have seen an increase in the amounts of fully
7 developed claims that are being submitted, the amount of
8 claims that are staying in that process, in that program.
9 And we have seen a tremendous increase in the accuracy and
10 the timeliness of those claims because they have made them
11 specific and had a specific group of people work on them.

12 Mr. Coffman. Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I yield back.

13 Chairman Sanders. Thank you very much.

14 Congressman Walz.

15 Mr. Walz. Thank you, Senator.

16 Commander, congratulations. Thank you, and to all of
17 you for being here. And I agree, as I do often with Dr.
18 Roe. It is great. You can see your families behind you on
19 this. And as I always say, behind every successful man is
20 an astonished mother-in-law, so--

21 [Laughter.]

22 Mr. Walz. So you have done well. I am grateful.

23 Bill, you are out there somewhere, from Plainview,
24 Minnesota. It is a heck of a note you had to come to D.C.
25 to get out of the heat, but to my Minnesotans, thank you for

1 that.

2 Just two points, and I think Mr. Michaud hit on it. I,
3 for one, and in full disclosure as a Legion member, I am
4 grateful you are here. Many decisions are made here not out
5 of malice or political intrigue. They are made out of
6 ignorance. And you are here to make sure that people are
7 well informed and that we get this right.

8 I would hit on two things just as comments of looking
9 at the long run. I can feel these things on the horizon. I
10 was looking at the minutes of the Defense Business Board, a
11 group of 20 powerful folks that no one knows sitting in the
12 basement of the Pentagon, and in their minutes, they talk
13 about things like metrics and legacy costs and overly
14 generous benefits. In sergeant speak, that means they are
15 going to cut the hell out of our benefits and health care to
16 save money. That is what it means and that is what they are
17 saying. Let us make sure we keep this narrative in the
18 right place on these overly generous benefits.

19 I would add the last thing, as it goes with that. No
20 one in here is disputing copays on our health care. We were
21 just simply under the impression they were made at Normandy
22 and they were made in Saigon and they were made in Baghdad
23 and they were made in Kandahar--

24 [Applause.]

25 Mr. Walz. It is not about doing our share, and it is

1 sure the heck not about winning a lottery. These are
2 benefits that are not overly generous. They are
3 compensating for what we ask of them, and decisions need to
4 be made. And no one here is saying that hard decisions do
5 not have to be made fiscally, but be on the lookout for 20
6 folks sitting in the basement of the Pentagon talking about
7 legacy costs and overly generous benefits. I know where
8 they are coming from.

9 So, I, for one, know and rest easy that you are at the
10 helm of a great organization. You have got folks sitting
11 behind you and Past Commanders who never faltered. This is
12 one long line dating back nearly 100 years of folks who
13 decided to come back, not end their service, but continue to
14 serve America, both for our veterans, for Americanism, for
15 our kids, for Boys and Girls State, for all the things you
16 do to make our country better, and that is how democracy
17 works. So, as frustrating as it gets, you are here. We are
18 listening. You gave us a plan, and now hold us accountable.

19 I yield back.

20 Mr. Dellinger. Thank you.

21 [Applause.]

22 Mr. Walz. Thank you.

23 Chairman Sanders. I think that is it from members, and
24 let me thank all the members who are here, and most
25 importantly, Commander, thank you--

1 Mr. Dellinger. Thank you.

2 Chairman Sanders. --your dedicated staff and all of
3 the folks from the American Legion who have joined us today.

4 This has been a serious discussion about serious
5 issues, and I just want to pick up on the point made by
6 several members. We all know that when a country goes to
7 war, there are a lot of parades, there are a lot of
8 speeches, there is a lot of attention to what is going on.
9 But what we also know is that 30 or 40 years after that war,
10 when some veteran dealing with TBI or PTSD or poverty is
11 sitting by himself in some apartment someplace or in a
12 hospital, sometimes we are not paying the kind of attention
13 to that person that we did 40 years previously when we went
14 to war.

15 And I think the lesson that we have learned in recent
16 years is that if a country wants to go to war--and as you
17 all know, we are having that debate today--that is a very
18 difficult debate in a democratic society. Honest people
19 have different points of view. But I hope we all understand
20 that the cost of war is a hell of a lot more than the planes
21 and the tanks and the bullets, that the real cost of war are
22 the lives of the men and women who have served and what that
23 war and that service has done to them for the rest of their
24 lives.

25 [Applause.]

1 Chairman Sanders. So I just conclude, I think on
2 behalf of both the Senate and the House committees, thank
3 you very, very much for being here today and we all look
4 forward to working with you in the future. Thank you very
5 much.

6 Mr. Dellinger. Thank you.

7 Chairman Sanders. The hearing is adjourned.

8 [Whereupon, at 11:46 a.m., the committees were
9 adjourned.]